

The Endless Voyage

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Even a brief semantic analysis is sufficient to show how Islam's religious vocabulary constantly reminds man of his condition as viator, pilgrimage being the ritual expression of this condition. A number of times in each of the five daily prayers - a total of seventeen times per day - the

Muslim asks God to lead him along the straight path (*sirât mustaqîm*): in the *Fâtiha*, the first sura of the Qur'an, the recitation of which is mandatory, it is as a matter of fact the only request that is made. The word *sirat* occurs over 40 times in the Qur'an; *sabîl*, its synonym, appears 176 times. The first meaning of the very word to denote Divine Law – *sharî'a* - is the road that leads to the watering place; in Arabian cities, the word for 'street' comes from the same root. The term that normally is translated by 'brotherhood' or 'mystical order' - *tarîqa* - belongs to the same semantic domain: a *tarîqa* is a road and, more specifically, a road to perfection, an itinerarium in Deum. He who sets out on the road, the *sâlik* - the 'walker' - does so under the direction of a *murshid*, a 'guide'.

The Muslims were travellers, in the literal sense of the word, from very early on. Piety, military expeditions, business, in addition to the search for knowledge ('Seek it, even as far as China', said the Prophet), led them to the far corners of the Earth. Even Ibn 'Arabi - as was the case for countless spiritual masters before and after him - tirelessly travelled through the Islamic world for nearly forty years, first in his native Andalusia, then in the Maghreb, and finally in the Middle East before settling down in Damascus, where he died in 1240.

Siyâha -the life of the wandering ascetics - can sometimes be one phase of initiatory training. For some individuals, *siyâha* can eventually represent a permanent form of sainthood. But it is generally not considered to be the most perfect one, and caveats against the dangers it presents are frequent in the teachings of the sufis. Among the rules that 'Abd al-Khalîq Ghijduvani (d. 1220), one of Ibn 'Arabi's contemporaries, left to the *tarîqa naqshbandiyya* was his sixth, which states: *safar dar watan*, 'travel in your own country'. Of course this rule has a symbolic meaning, but it must also be taken literally. Najm al-din Kubra (d. 1200), who was living in the same period, is the author of a short work in which he outlines the principles that the traveller must observe. But if he speaks of the *safar zâhir*, the 'exterior' voyage whose spiritual dangers he emphasizes, he first describes the aspects of the *safar qalbî*, the 'voyage of the heart', the ten conditions of which he defines.[1] Ibn 'Arabi, like Kubra, looks at both the interior and the exterior. The reader nevertheless has the idea that he is more interested in the *safar qalbî*, particularly in a number of chapters from the *Futûhat al-Makkiyya*. [2] A thorough analysis of Ibn 'Arabi's numerous writings about the voyage would require considerable time. For this reason I will limit my remarks to a treatise dedicated exclusively to this theme, the *Kitâb al-isfâr 'an natâ'ij al-asfâr*; the 'Book of the Unveiling of the Effects of the Voyage'. Up until now there has been but one, less than satisfactory, edition of this work, published in Hyderabad in 1948. Fortunately, my colleague and friend Denis Gril has just carefully completed a critical

edition and French translation of the work, and we now have a reliable text with which to work. [3] Although I make no claims to dealing with the totality of the richness that the Kitâb al-isfâr offers, I will attempt an analysis of the work's major themes.

If man is indeed tied to what in the writings of the French School of Spirituality in the seventeenth century was called 'la vie voyageère', the travelling life, it is first of all because he belongs to a universe that is itself a perpetuum mobile. 'Existence begins with movement', writes Ibn 'Arabi. 'Thus, there can be no immobility in it, for, if it remained immobile, it would return to its original state, that of nothingness.' It follows that 'the voyage never ends, neither in the world above nor in the world below.' (§3) The course of the heavenly bodies, the rotation of the celestial spheres, the trajectory that, from the time of the sowing of his father's seed, leads man through the four seasons of life followed by the stages of his fate after death are, among others, examples of this perpetual movement of the cosmic bodies. Nor is this all: God Himself 'is travelling' from the 'Cloud' (al-'amâ), that is, from what the Latin translations of pseudo-Dionysius call the divina calligo. If He is immutable in His Essence, He propagates Himself through His Names in an inexhaustible procession of theophanies, as seen in the Qur'an and the hadith: He 'sits' on the Throne, He 'goes down' to that Heaven that is closest to the Earth, He extends his creative activities in all directions of the universe. His Word Itself is directed from on high to down below and, from the lowest of the heavens it rains stars (nujûman) into the heart of man (§18). Each verse of revelation, from the last to the first, in turn becomes one of the successive abodes (manazil) that the son of Adam will inhabit in his ascension toward God.[4]

Thus, willingly or not, knowingly or not, each creature is travelling on a path. But, as an untranslatable play on words in the Arabic title suggests, this path cannot properly be called a 'voyage' (safar) unless it is also a disclosure or an unveiling (isfar): in Arabic, the verb safara is used to denote the action of a woman uncovering her face (§17). We will presently see the ultimate consequence of this taking off of the veil, without which the voyage cannot bear fruits of spiritual knowledge. However, it is first of all important to know that there are three kinds of voyage (§2). The first is that which leads toward God 'by land or by sea' (Q.10: 22); the route 'by land', which has its origin in faith in revelation, is the surer of the two, while the route by sea, that of speculative thought, is uncertain and even dangerous. The second is the voyage in God; there the traveller is plunged into interminable bewilderment (hayra).[5] He is no longer in via; he is in patria, but the voyage continues endlessly because God is always new. The word hayra is usually translated by 'perplexity'. In Ibn 'Arabi's work, however, it is closer to the epektasis that Gregory of Nyssa describes in his sixth homily on the Song of Songs: that infinite progression that leads the soul 'from beginning to beginning through beginnings that never end'. 'God's gifts are never ending', says Ibn 'Arabi (§55), 'and there is no last gift to end them all.' The third kind of voyage (§7) takes place from God. This return to the creatures might be considered as a rejection; on the other hand, it can also be taken as a sign of divine election, as in the case of the prophets and the saints, where there is no separation implied. Actually, for Ibn 'Arabi, perfect sainthood - walâya - just as its etymology suggests, is 'proximity', but this proximity is twofold: close to men, the walî never ceases being close to God, and it is for this reason that he 'joins together heaven and earth'.[6]

In a number of places the Qur'an recalls the wanderings of the prophets (a word which, in

Islam, is of course also used for what the Biblical tradition refers to as 'patriarchs'). It is with these prophetic models as a starting point that the Shaykh al-Akbar attempts to describe the rules and modalities of the voyage. One comment should be made at this point. For his adversaries - and there are still a number of those today who regularly attempt to put a stop to the diffusion of his books - Ibn 'Arabi is nothing more than a philosopher in disguise, and his teachings are no more than neo-Platonic prattle vainly camouflaged by twisted quotations from scripture. In an inane work, but one quite representative of this kind of polemical interpretation, an Indian author, a few decades ago, spent his final lines inviting Muslims to get hold of themselves again, with his anguished call: Away from Plotinus and his host and BACK TO MUHAMMAD, these last three words being in capital letters.[7] It is not difficult to see in the Kitâb al-isfâr, as is the case with all of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, that the contrary is true: his teaching is drawn entirely from the substance of the Qur'an, and his entire work can actually be read as an immense, penetrating exegesis whose boldest interpretations always remain scrupulously attentive to the letter of the revealed Book. By the word 'exegesis' in this particular case, I am not referring, however, to tafsir in the usual sense of the word, that of commentary'.[8] Ibn 'Arabi is quite clear about this: 'When I speak about a voyage, I am speaking only as my own essence is concerned; I make no attempt here to comment on any events that happened to the prophets.' (§45)I shall return to this point in a moment.

What Ibn 'Arabi means in this passage should not be taken as opening the door to free interpretations, using the Qur'an as a pretext. Quite the contrary. It can be seen that in each case it is in analysing the vocabulary of the verses in question, in sticking to their grammatical peculiarities (and, for example, even to the literal meanings of the technical terms that denote desinential inflections) that he manages to bring out the meaning of the voyages undertaken by the prophets.

Even though Ibn 'Arabi mentions the voyages of Jonas, Saul, and Jesus in his prologue, he never returns to them in the book itself. The Qur'anic episodes that he does deal with are those that concern Muhammad and then, successively, Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Joseph, and Moses. Before looking in depth at the section where the Shaykh alAkbar deals with the celestial ascension of the Prophet of Islam, I would first like to make a few observations regarding passages about the individuals just mentioned.

Adam's 'voyage' (§26-31) is a fall, and therefore appears to be (fi mâ yazhar) a distancing. This is only in appearance, for this fall, far from being a 'downfall', ends up being an ennoblement (hubût tashrîf) like that spoken of in a number of Ibn 'Arabi's other texts.[9] According to the Qur'an (3:191; 38:27), God did not create the world in vain (bâtilan). Under the Law, knowledge of the world is part and parcel to knowledge of God. This is likewise a theme characteristic of Ibn 'Arabi's teaching.[10] Thus, although it differs markedly from the way it is seen in the patristic tradition, Adam's 'mistake' is a felix culpa, and it is one that is essential in order that the divine promise (Q. 2:30) be carried out for man to be God's 'Lieutenant', his representative (khalifa) on earth. One important point to be mentioned about this passage (§ 27) is that the idea of what might be called 'original sin' appears there, although for lack of a clearly defined doctrine the concept of original sin is considered to be absent in Islam. For Ibn 'Arabi, Adam's 'disobedience' is quite real: but it is actually the disobedience of the progeny that he was carrying in his loins at the time. Thus, we were all a party to it: original sin is not some

fatality that we unjustly inherited. Sub specie aeternitatis, the transgressions in which I am involved today had already been committed when the history of mankind began.

Idris (§32-6), the Biblical Enoch, he who 'disappeared because God had taken him' (Gen. 5:24), is mentioned only twice in the Qur'an, and quite briefly. In contrast to that of Adam, his voyage is upward: 'We have raised him up to a high place', says the verse which is the starting point of this section of the Kitâb al-isfâr (Q. 19:57). Ibn 'Arabi, who dedicates Chapter 4 of the Fusûs to Idris, also speaks of him at some length in Chapters 14 and 15 of the Futûhât, although in this case instead of being named, he is referred to emblematically as mudâwî l-kulûm 'he who heals wounds'. This reference to a therapeutic role is connected to a long tradition, to be found for example in Tha'labi's Qisâs al-anbiyâ', or in the Rasâ'il Ikhwân al-safâ, which identifies Idris-Enoch with Hermes (or rather, with the first Hermes, Hirmis al-awwal) and ascribes to him all cosmological knowledge.[11] Carried off into the celestial spheres, he is taught the mystery of their revolutions, of the links between what is above and what is below, and of how, step by step, divine commandments come down through the great chain of beings. He resides in the middle heaven, where the sun also is, the 'heart' of the Cosmos, and he possesses the knowledge of time and of its rhythms that order the cadenced flow of history.

Noah (§37-40) begets post-diluvian humanity, and thus preserves the future of Adam's progeny. He is, for us, as Ibn 'Arabi says in the Futûhât, al-âb al-thânî, the second father.[12] His voyage in the Ark - horizontal this time, as opposed to the vertical plane of the preceding voyages - is the voyage of salvation (safar al-najât). The appropriate Qur'anic 'sign' for Noah, the miracle that establishes him as a prophet, is the athanor (al-tannûr, Q. 11:40; 23:27), the huge alchemical furnace wherein the great waters of the deluge churn. The athanor associates water with fire. In these two opposing elements Noah knows how to see what the infidels were not able to see: accidental forms of the unique substance of the universe in perpetual metamorphosis. He thus discovers the laws of transmutation and the mysteries of the 'Great Work', what Ibn 'Arabi elsewhere refers to as 'the alchemy of happiness'.

'I go toward my Lord, He leads me' (Q. 37:99): this Qur'anic verse is, in a sense, the reply made by Abraham (§41-3) to the Biblical command 'Leave your country and go toward the land that I shall show to you.' (Gen. 12:1) Abraham's peaceful confidence in divine guidance appears to be unfounded, since it ends up exposing him to the sacrifice of his son.[13] This trial is nevertheless justified: one should ask nothing of God but God Himself. Abraham, however, had asked God to send him a son (Q. 37:100); it is, consequently, in the very object of his request that he is smitten. Nevertheless, the trial consists not in the fulfilment of the sacrifice, but rather in the order to perform it; after all, a ram is substituted for the presumed victim. This substitution is in appearance only: from all eternity, only the ram was destined to be sacrificed and, in Abraham's vision, it is the ram that appeared in the form of his son.[14] In this sense, Abraham's voyage is a failed voyage: he did not know how to interpret the vision; that is, he did not know how to take the path that led from the perceived image in the world of images to the reality that this image represented. The Arabic verb that I am here translating by 'interpret' is extremely expressive, since it is used to describe the action of fording a river or crossing a bridge; we will see it again shortly.

Etymologically, Lot's name (§44-5) calls to mind the idea of 'adherence', and this is why, in

Chapter 14 of the Futûhât where, like Idris, the prophets before Muhammad are referred to in emblematic terms, Lot appears under the pseudonym of al-mulsiq, 'he who sticks': he is totally tied to God and, when faced with idol worshippers, he seeks refuge only in God. Fleeing Sodom with his gaze fixed ahead, he walks toward a place that bears the name al-yaqîn, 'certitude', and where there still stands today a mosque (visited by Ibn 'Arabi) erected in his memory. Lot's wife does turn around to look. For Ibn 'Arabi, she is a figure of the impassioned soul who, even in the highest contemplation, still attempts, through a reflex movement, to reach out and grasp spiritual joys and hold on tightly.

The long section (§50-70) regarding Moses, and which ends the work, entails six episodes from the Qur'an. The first concerns Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai (Q. 7: 143)[15] at the end of a waiting period of forty nights. This number is related to the quaternary structure of the macrocosm and the microcosm, and particularly to the human body, whose four humours bile, choler, phlegm, and blood) are the products of combinations of the four simple principles: cold, heat, dryness, and humidity.[16] But this voyage, where Ibn 'Arabi defines Moses' attitude through his rigorous observance of appropriate behaviour (adab) and service owed to God, is first and foremost a prototype of spiritual retreat (khalwa), especially the one called arba'iniyya, the forty-day retreat regarding which the Prophet said: 'He who devotes himself exclusively to God for a period of forty mornings, the fountains of wisdom will spring forth from his heart and upon his tongue.'[17] But, as Ibn 'Arabi warns, just as Moses, before departing, had left Aaron in charge of looking over his community, 'the man who undertakes this journey must leave his substitute with his people.' For, like Moses on Mount Sinai, he will collapse, struck down (sa'iqa) by the power of the theophany: his 'people' - his own human nature - who have remained at the foot of the mountain, must remain under the guard of Divine Law.

The following two episodes relate directly to the preceding one, and are tied together by a common theme, that of haste ('ajal). 'Why did you hasten to leave your people?', God asks Moses when he arrives at Sinai. 'I hurried toward You, Lord, so that You might be satisfied', he replies (Q. 20:83-4). Moses' haste is ruled by the sole consideration of God's pleasure. In no way did it conflict with his obedience: Moses goes before his Lord only after a certain, set amount of time: the elapse of the forty nights of waiting and preparation that had been required of him. His haste is an expression of the zeal with which he submits to the Lord's call.

But all haste is not necessarily good. When he comes down from the mountain and returns to the creatures, Moses discovers the idol worship of the Bani Isra'il, and it is for their impetuosity that he rebukes them. 'Did you wish to hurry the commandment of your Lord?' (Q. 7:150), he asks them. Another verse from the Qur'an is helpful in understanding why haste, so praiseworthy in one case, is just the opposite in the other. It states that 'Man is made of haste', to which God immediately adds: 'I will show you My signs. Do not rush Me'. Moses, the kalîm Allâh, he who speaks with God, was late in coming back. His community became impatient, just as each of us does when God is silent, when we are forced to wait for a sign of His Presence. We do not desire God, we desire to enjoy God, to receive his sensible graces without delay; we wish to set the time and the place of the meeting ourselves. We refuse the forty-day trial period which, in our case, might end up being forty years or longer. We are not in a hurry so that God, and God alone, might be satisfied. Man creates a substitute God because this impatient greed is disappointed. Let it be noted that the very name of the Golden Calf

reveals the cause of this false worship: the calf, 'ijl in Arabic, is actually related to the same root as 'ajal, haste, and the spelling of these two words is rigorously identical.

This quite significant linguistic relationship between the first mistake, impatience, and its consequent crime of idol worship, is not sufficient to explain the Golden Calf. According to the Qur'an (20:85, 87, 95), it was an individual named al-Samiri who first took the initiative of carving the idol. This Samiri, for Ibn 'Arabi, is not a common, run-of-the-mill idol worshipper. In a development that he will later continue in the Futûhât,[18] the Shaykh al-Akbar states that this man had been blessed with a vision in the course of which he saw one of the angels that carry the Throne of God. There are four of these angels. According to a very old Muslim tradition - one that goes back probably as far as Wahb b. Munabbih,[19] and where there is obviously some similarity with the Biblical accounts of both Ezechiel's vision (Ez. 1:10) and the Book of Revelations (4:6) - they take the forms of a man, a lion, an eagle, and a bull. The Samiri, seeing the bull, thought he could recognize in it Moses' God. Thus, it was a small bull that he sculpted with the Egyptians' gold. Via a premature interpretation of an incomplete spiritual experience he, too, attempted to anticipate divine acts: an inexcusable haste which, here again, is cause for major sin.

I think the commentaries that these few examples from the Kitâb al-isfâr have inspired me to make are sufficiently illustrative of the pedagogical character of Ibn 'Arabi's spiritual interpretations. His intention is emphasized in a number of sentences: 'He who, like Idris, travels toward the world of his heart...' (§36); 'Set out on your ark...' (§39); or, even more patently, 'these [prophetic] voyages are bridges and passageways constructed so that we might cross over them toward our own essences and our own beings' (§45). The lesson is clear: each of us should construct an ark, like Noah; each of us, like Moses, is called to the Sinai of vision and each of us must come back down to our 'people', toward our own corruptible nature always tempted by infidelity, and which can only be saved by observance of the Sacred Law.

Of all these 'bridges' that lead us to our essential reality, the story of the celestial ascension of Muhammad is the most important. It is in the pages where Ibn 'Arabi invites his reader to meditate upon this story (§22-5) that the central theme of his work can be seen.[20] Word by word, the first verse of sura 17 (Al-isrâ) is meticulously analysed. This voyage, which is to lead the Prophet to the threshold of the Divine Presence, is a nocturnal one: thus, it takes place 'in that moment that is the dearest to lovers'.[21] The Prophet is not named, rather he is referred to in the verse as a 'servant' - 'the noblest of names', Ibn 'Arabi notes - and, more precisely, as 'His servant' ('abduhu), that is to say, the servant of the transcendent Self, and not of any particular aspect of God. This absolute servitude ('ubûda) does not only represent the purest state of abandonment that man is capable of. The extinction of all individual will in that of God completely lays bare the real status of the creature, that is, its radical ontological poverty (and it is thus that the voyage, safar, is isfâr, unveiling). This status is of course recognized by each and every Muslim when the Fatiha is recited. Saying yâka na'budu wa yâka nasta'în is admitting that we possess neither being nor the power to act. But this admission can be only verbal. For the Prophet, on the other hand, it involves the totality of the human constitution. This is why, when the saints know only 'voyages of the spirit' (isrâ'at rûhâniyya),[22] that of Muhammad is in body. His body has already, in this world, acquired the privileges of the glorious body of the resurrected. Moreover, it is by reason of this perfect servitude that the Qur'an does not say that

'he travelled', but rather that 'He' - God - 'had him travel'. There is no movement on his part. He is moved by God: the 'endless voyage' is a motionless voyage.[23]

Are the admirable teachings of the Kitâb al-isfâr nothing more than a subject for learned papers, a pretext for scholarly discussion? This is the question that needs to be raised after this brief look at the work. In this iron age, are the spiritual sciences of which Ibn 'Arabi gives us a glimpse still accessible? The Shaykh al-Akbar's work is entirely oriented toward the horizon of the eschata: revelation is sealed by the Qur'an, prophecy is finished, the Last Judgement is imminent. 'We are presently', he says in the Futûhât, 'in the third third of the night of the universe's sleep' - a sleep that began 'with the death of God's Messenger'.[24] In this universe, corrupt and on the road to dissolution, soon to be inhabited solely by men 'like unto animals', [25] is sainthood not any more than a golden legend, and the knowledge of God a mirage forever in retreat before him who pursues it?

One superb page of the Kitâb al-isfâr (§8) offers a paradoxical reply to these questions. If, for God's servants, the human condition is harder today, the reward is also greater: 'just one rak'a performed by us (in the ritual prayer) is worth what in earlier times a whole life of worship was worth.' In the last third of the night, the dawn approaches: the future world is but an infinitesimal distance from the one in which we are presently spending our mortal existence. The attraction that it has is consequently stronger than it has ever been. As a result, 'these unveiling breakthroughs are prompter, visions are more frequent, gnosis is more abundant.' And, since there are presently few human beings prepared to receive them, all the greater is the portion for those who are worthy. The spiritual sciences also, Ibn 'Arabi avers, will continue to grow, to the benefit of these men. They will continue to grow until the return of Jesus, the Seal of Universal Sainthood, whose parousia will announce the end of time. For whoever is ready to observe the rules of the voyage and face the risks, the way is still open.

Notes

1. K. adâb al-sulûk, ed. M. Molé, Annales Islamologiques, IV, 1963, 61-78.
2. On the theme of the voyage in the Fut., see especially Chs 174, 175, 190, 191.
3. Ibn 'Arabi, Le Dévoilement des Effets du Voyage. Arabic text ed., trans., and presented by D. Gril, Combas, 1994. Subsequent references to the K. al-isfâr are from the paragraph numbers of this critical edition.
4. On Ibn 'Arabi's establishment of a correspondence between Qur'anic verses, taken in inverse order from where they appear in the Qur'an, and the manâzil that span the path of man's ascent toward God, see M. Chodkiewicz, Un Océan sans Rivage, Paris, 1992 (An Ocean without Shore, Albany, 1993), Ch. 3.
5. On the idea of hayra in Ibn 'Arabi's works, see, e.g., Fut., I, 270, 420; II, 137, 607, 661; III, 490; IV, 43, 196-7, 245, 280; K. al-tajalliyât, Taj. nums. 21 and 94 (ed. O. Yahia, Tehran, 1988).

6. See M. Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des Saints*, Paris, 1986 (*Seal of the Saints*, Cambridge, 1993), Ch. 10.

7. Burhan Ahmad Faruqi, *The Mujaddid's Conception of Tawhid*, Lahore, 1940, p.127. As the title suggests, both this work and a number of other Indian publications see Ahmad Sirhindi as a spokesman for an orthodox sufism incompatible with Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine. I. Friedmann put an end to these outrageously simplistic views in his *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi*, Montreal/London, 1971.

8. Ibn 'Arabi sometimes sticks to tafsîr stricto sensu - as, for example, in his *Ijâz al-bayân*, ed. M. al-Ghurab, Damascus, 1989. But, as he points out, for example, in Ch. 54 of his *Fut.* (Bulaq, 1329, I, 279), his attention is most often drawn to the *ishârât* ('allusions'), i.e. to what the Qur'an allows to be unveiled for him who recites it 'within himself' (and not 'in the horizons'). See also K. al-isfâr (§40) where Ibn 'Arab stresses that what he is doing is not tafsîr.

9. E.g., *Fut.*, II, 141; III, 50, 143.

10. See Ch. 22 of the *Fusûs al-Hikam*, ed. A.'Affifi, Beirut, 1946, p.181, and *Fut.*, III, 349.

11. Islamic tradition ascribes the construction of the pyramids to Idris/Hermes. Foretold of the imminence of the great flood, he is to have represented there the arts and the sciences, as well as the instruments of both. See *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, trans. H. A. R. Gibb, Cambridge, 1958, I, pp. 50-2.

12. *Fut.*, II, 10.

13. This son is here identified by Ibn 'Arabi as Ismaël. Current Islamic interpretation of verse 37:102 is that the son is Ismaël, even though his name is not specified. Ibn 'Abbas and Ibn Mas'ud, on the other hand, believe that the son in question is Isaac. In the *Fusûs*, it is nevertheless in Ch. 6, dedicated to Isaac, that Ibn 'Arabi brings up Abraham's sacrifice, and not in Ch. 7, the ch. on Ismaël.

14. Cf. *Fusûs*, I, 85-6.

15. This important episode was dealt with in my presentation to the tenth annual symposium of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arab Society in the UK at Durham in March, 1993 ('The vision of God according to Ibn 'Arabi', published in *Prayer and Contemplation*, ed. S. Hirtenstein, Oxford, 1993, pp. 53-67).

16. In Islam, the number 40, which is the value of the letter *mîm*, is endowed with substantial symbolic importance; it deserves a much more thorough study than it has been given in this cursory presentation. As the example from the *arba'iniyya* cited below suggests, it is frequently associated with the period that precedes the infusion of the spirit into the body, or, on the other hand, with the length of time after which the spirit is separated from the body.

17. On *khalwa*, see *Fut.*, Chs 78, 79 (II, 150-2). Ibn 'Arab composed an independent treatise on

the subject, the *Risâla al-khalwa al-mutlaqa* (for the manuscripts identified, see O. Yahia, *Histoire et Classification de l'Oeuvre d'Ibn 'Arabi*, Damascus, 1964, R. G. num. 255), of which one edition is extant, Cairo, n.d., Maktaba 'âlam al-fikr. On the practical rules of the forty-day retreat, there is a detailed description in Suhrawardi's *'Awârif al-ma' ârif*, Chs 26-8.

18. *Fut.*, I, 149 (Ch. 13 on the *hamalat al-'arsh*). Ibn 'Arabi explains in this ch. just why there will no longer be four, but rather eight angels that carry the Throne on the Judgement Day (Q. 69:1-7). We might point out that the Samiri can appear to be a positive symbolic figure. In the *Tarjumân al-ashwâq* (poem num. 30, line 12, Beirut, 1961, pp. 136-7) Ibn 'Arabi exclaims: 'My heart is the Samiri of the moment...'

19. *Suyuti*, *Al-durr al-manthûr*, Beirut, n.d., VI, p.261 (on v.69:17).

20. The Quranic verses that refer to the *mi'raj* (17:1, 53:1-18) were inspirational for a number of pages in Ibn 'Arabi's works (Chs 167 and 367 of the *Fut.*, *K. al-isrâ*, *Risâlat al-anwâr*, *K. mashâhid al-asrâr al-qudsiyya*). See Seal, Ch. 10, and Ocean, Ch. 4.

21. This nocturnal characteristic is emphasized in the verse, as Ibn 'Arabi notes, through the redundant use of the word *laylan* with the word *isrâ*; which itself already denotes a night journey.

22. *Fut.*, III, 342.

23. Cf. *Fut.*, II, 382, where Ibn 'Arabi speaks of *sâlik lâ sâlik*, voyaging without voyaging.

24. *Fut.*, III, 188.

25. *Fusûs*, I, 67.

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The Vision of God

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'You shall not see Me!' (lan tarânî). The divine reply to Moses' request (arinî unzur ilayka) 'Let me see, so that I can behold You', Q. 7:143), seems final. It is no less categorical in its formulation than the one that Exodus gives in a parallel account (Ex. 33:18-23):[1] 'Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.' Another verse seems, moreover, to extend to all creatures the impossibility of seeing the Face of God, as the Prophet of the Banu Isra'il was informed: lâ tudrikuhu 'l-absâr wa huwa yudriku 'l-absâr, 'The looks do not reach Him but it is He who reaches the looks' (Q. 6:103).

Despite their evident meaning, these two verses are interpreted in many ways within the Islamic tradition and, more often than one would expect, in a way which safeguards the possibility of vision. The lan tarânî addressed to Moses, in particular, provokes numerous commentaries. The verse continues: 'But look at the mountain; if it remains firm in its place, then you shall see Me. And when his Lord manifested Himself to the mountain, He reduced it to dust and Moses fell down, thunderstruck. When he came to himself he said, Glory be to You! I turn to You with repentance and I am the first of the believers. For Tabari, the theophany at Sinaï which reduces the mountain to dust and which even so, he says, 'had only the strength of a little finger', demonstrates the fundamental inability of creatures to bear the vision of God, and the repentance of Moses testifies that his request was presumptuous and unacceptable.[2] But another classic commentary, by Qurtubi, whilst avoiding taking sides too explicitly, favours a very different opinion. For some people, he says, lan tarânî means: 'you shall not see Me in this world'. But, he adds, according to others, whose views Qadi Iyad has recorded, 'Moses sees God and that is why he falls down in a swoon.' Similarly, commenting on the verse which states that 'the looks do not reach Him', Qurtubi, who obviously tends towards an admission of the possibility of vision, sets out the arguments of those who defend this point of view: the ordinary look cannot reach God but God creates in certain beings - and such is certainly the case of the Prophet Muhammad - a look by which He can be seen. Besides, if the impossibility were definitive, would Moses, who is an Envoy, have had the audacity to ask God for an absurd favour? Concerning Muhammad, Qurtubi relates the contradictory assertions of Aysha, on the one hand, and of Abu Hurayra and Ibn Abbas on the other, and favours the latter. The question, for him, is not to know if the Prophet saw God but to know how he saw Him: bi'l-basar? aw bi-ayni qalbihi? With his physical eyes or with the eye of the heart? [3] However, the great theologian Fakhr al-din Razi, Ibn Arabi's contemporary and correspondent, dismisses the possibility that Moses saw God, but affirms that vision is possible in principle.[4]

The position of the mutakallimûn - the theologians - on this question is generally left fairly open, at least if one discounts the case of the Mu'tazilites.[5] For the Ash'arites, it is rationally conceivable and scripturally established that 'the looks' (absâr) will see God in the future life. Does the Qur'an not assert: 'On that day, there will be radiant faces which shall see their Lord' (75:22-3)? Did the Prophet not say: 'you shall see your Lord just as you see the moon on the night of the full moon'? [6] Verse 6:103, according to which 'the looks do not reach Him', cannot justify any conclusive objection. For some theologians, it is exclusively a question of this lower world and does not apply to the heavenly status of the chosen ones. For others, it is necessary

to distinguish between idrâk, 'all-embracing perception' (ihâta), effectively forever forbidden to the creatures, and ru'ya, vision itself, to which they have access but which will never exhaust the divine infinity. As for the vision of God here below, whilst it is ruled out by some, others reserve it for exceptional individuals: again, a saying of Aysha's, according to which the Prophet did not see God at the time of his mir'âj comes up in the debate and also an equally categorical assertion of Ibn Abbas's to the contrary, which relies in particular on two verses of the sûra Al-najm (Q. 53:11,13). Moreover, a du'â is attributed to the Prophet in which he addresses God in the following terms which are very similar to those of Moses: as'aluka ladhdhat al-nazar ilâ wajhika, 'I beg of You the joy of seeing Your face'.[7]

If one now turns towards the spiritual masters who preceded Ibn 'Arabi, one finds there, too, many differences of interpretation, but this time they rely on spiritual experience rather than knowledge from books. A comparative clarification is taking place which is conveyed by the increased precision of the vocabulary. For Sahl al Tustari, in the 9th century, vision *stricto sensu* is the privilege of the elect in the heavenly abode: kushûf al-'iyân fî-l-akhira. But the men of God benefit in advance from the kushûf al-qalb fî'l-dunyâ, from the 'lifting of the veil of the heart here below'.[8] In his *Kashf al-Mahjûb*, Hujwiri relies on the words of Dhu'l-Nun, Junayd and Abu Yazid al-Bistami among others, to assert that God can be contemplated in this world and that this contemplation resembles vision in the future life.[9] To the notion of 'unveiling' (root k sh f) that we have just come across, that of 'contemplation' (root sh h d) is therefore added. I shall come back, with regard to Ibn 'Arabi, to the problems posed by the vocabulary of these authors who are careful to distinguish precisely between all modes of mystical knowledge.

In his famous *Risâla*, Qushayri envisages three degrees in the progression towards knowledge of God: muhâdara, 'presence', mukâshafa, 'unveiling', and mushâhada, 'contemplation'.[10] These stages correspond to a standard model and, with the same or other names, one finds them almost everywhere in the literature of the *tasawwuf*. However, if one consults the great commentary of the Qur'an of which Qushayri is also the author, it confirms what the *Risâla* hinted at: that vision as such remains forbidden in this life. It is worth quoting what he writes about the incident at Sinai: 'Moses came like one of those who are consumed by desire and lost in love. Moses came without Moses. He came when nothing of Moses remained in Moses.' But, Qushayri adds, it is under the sway of this amorous drunkenness that he had the audacity to ask for vision. It was refused him but, because of this state where he no longer had control over what he was saying, he was not punished for his boldness. Muhammad himself hoped for this supreme favour, without expressing his wish, however. But he was not granted his wish either, Qushayri maintains.[11]

If we next examine the words of two other great Sufi contemporaries of the Shaykh al-Akbar, we notice that for them a direct perception of Divine Reality is definitely possible. But is it a question of anything other than what spiritual Christians called 'an advance payment of beatitude', that is, of a still confused and imperfect vision? Najm al-din Kubra describes the stages of contemplation, the last of which is the contemplation of the Unique Essence.[12] Ruzbehan Baqli, in his *Tafsîr*,[13] concludes from the Qur'anic text that Moses did not obtain vision. In another of his works, however, he too maintains that the viator can arrive at the point where his *sirr*, the secret centre of his being, 'is immersed in the ocean of the Divine Essence'.[14]

There are, therefore, considerable differences amongst the authors whom I have cited. The very meaning of the word 'vision' (ru'ya - not to be confused with ru'yâ, vision in a dream) remains, nevertheless, rather vague. Should one understand it literally as designating a perception identical to the apprehension of material objects by the organ of sight? Or is it on the contrary only necessary to retain the suggestion of an analogy, the relation between its two terms then remaining to be clarified? In the latter case, is there a radical difference in nature between 'unveiling', 'contemplation' and 'vision'? A contrario, if these terms only express differences of degree - and since the highest contemplation seems accessible to some people who are neither Envoys nor Prophets - what does the *lan tarânî* addressed to Moses mean? The abrupt Qur'anic phrase is variously understood but it evidently inspires a great deal of uncertainty.

The picture I have just drawn from a few examples is extremely scanty, leaving out many subtleties. I think, nevertheless, that it faithfully draws the outlines of the landscape which opens out around this Sinai where Moses, called by his Lord, is not satisfied with hearing Him and demands to see Him. Ibn 'Arabi is the heir of this long and complex tradition. He is, in particular, going to take up the rich vocabulary of spiritual phenomenology such as the men of the Way have gradually built up, without stinting nevertheless on inflecting the meaning or drawing out the significance. But above all, one is going to discover, disseminated in the immense body of his works, a teaching which, nourished by his intimate experience, illuminates the whole field of the knowledge of God, in all its forms and in all its degrees.

Before attempting to discern the essential points of his doctrine, it would be worthwhile going over the account of his own meeting with Moses, in the sixth heaven, as he relates it in Chapter 367 of the *Futûhât*. 'You asked to see Him', he says to Moses. 'Now, the Prophet of God has said: no-one will see God before he dies.'^[15] 'That is so', replies Moses. 'When I asked to see Him, He granted my wish and I fell down thunderstruck. And it was whilst I was struck down that I saw Him.' 'Were you dead, then?' 'I was, in fact, dead.'^[16] One already notices here that, for the Shaykh al-Akbar, the *lan tarânî* is not, under certain conditions, an insurmountable obstacle.

But the issue of the vision of God and what it means for Ibn 'Arabi is not separable from an axiom which, in Akbarian doctrine, governs all methods of spiritual realisation. In accordance with the *hadîth qudsî* often quoted by the Shaykh al-Akbar: 'I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known...',^[17] God is known because He wants to be known. He is only known because He wants to be known and He alone determines the form and the extent of this knowledge. One must never lose sight of this point if one is concerned with correctly interpreting everything that Ibn 'Arabi writes on the steps of the Way and on the charismas that correspond to them. In fact his teaching, like that of all the great masters of the Islamic tradition, presents two complementary aspects and this polarity can be a source of confusion: in so far as it is metaphysical, it explains the principles and aims; in so far as it is initiatory teaching, it explains the means and therefore takes as point of departure the awareness that the ordinary man has of himself. Now, whatever his theoretical knowledge, the disciple, when he undertakes the *sulûk*, does not escape from the voluntarist illusion. He considers himself to be autonomous. He is *murîd* - willing, desiring. He still does not know that he is *murîd* because he is *murad* - willed,

desired by Him whom he claims to reach by his own powers. The initiatory teaching, therefore, in order to be realistic, displays an apparent aspect that one could call Pelagian. Read without discernment, it risks giving the impression that by putting certain precise techniques into practice - such and such a form of invocation or type of retreat (khalwa) - specific results will definitely be obtained. The literature of the *turuq*, in later times, unfortunately also contributes to reinforcing this impression, despite some rhetorical precautions. The Shaykh alAkbar's work, so long as one does not make selective use of it, constantly warns against this naïve and dangerous interpretation. The *hadīth qudsī*, the beginning of which I have already quoted, is perfectly clear about this: 'I therefore created the creatures and I made Myself known by them and it is through Me that they have known Me (fa-bī 'arafûnī).'

At the core of the vocabulary of spiritual experience, there is, therefore, in the Shaykh al-Akbar's doctrine, a term which is its key: *tajallī* (a word that, for the Arab Christians, designates the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor), which can be translated, according to the context, as 'epiphany' or 'theophany'. It was already used in the works of the Sufi authors whom I have mentioned but one finds it constantly in Ibn 'Arabi's writings. Moreover, it is directly linked to the verse with which this paper begins: the Divine Manifestation which reduces the mountain to dust and strikes Moses down is expressed in the Qur'an by the verb *tajallā*. *Tajallī* is a divine act and it is by virtue of this divine act that man can attain a direct perception of God, whatever degree or form that may take.

The Akbarian doctrine of theophanies is complex.[18] I would merely like to recall here the essential features, commencing by quoting some lines which appear at the beginning of a chapter of the *Futūhāt* which is precisely devoted to the Pole (*qutb*) whose 'initiatory dwelling-place' is the phrase of verse 7:143 'and when his Lord manifests on the mountain:

*God - there is nothing Apparent but He in every similar and every contrary
In every kind and every species, in all union and all separation
In everything that the senses or the intellect perceive
In every body and every form.[19]*

These lines express synthetically what many others explain in detail: that is, that theophanies which proceed from the divine name *al-Zāhir*, the Apparent[20] never cease, even if men do not know it,[21] since the universe is only the theatre where they are shown and our look, wherever it may turn, only meets with them. If this world is varied, if it is perpetually changing, it is because God does not appear twice in the same form, nor in the same form to two beings.[22]

But the perfect gnostic (*al-'arīf al-kāmil*) recognises God in all these forms, unlike other men who only recognise Him when He presents Himself to them in the form of their mental image that they make of Him.[23] This *'arīf al-kāmil* himself, however, even if he perceives the perpetual succession of theophanies, even if he distinguishes one from the other and knows why they are produced, does not know how they are produced for that is a secret which belongs only to the Essence.[24] This has already been pointed out by Henri Corbin and Toshihiko Izutsu[25] and I shall not dwell on it, my intention being limited to determining the effects of the doctrine of the *tajalliyāt* on the faculty given to man to 'grasp' God - and on this point I think it moreover necessary to correct Corbin's interpretation somewhat.

First of all, a double distinction between theophanies is essential, according to their origin on one hand and according to their form on the other. The first is standard: it is the one which establishes a hierarchy between the theophanies of the divine acts, those of the attributes and those of the Essence.[26] One already finds it in the works of authors whom I have cited, for example Najm al-din Kubra and Ruzbehan Baqli. The second, although it did not escape the masters of the past, finds its most precise and complete formulation in Ibn 'Arabi. Tajallî can appear in a sensible form or in an imaginal form. It can also be a manifestation transcending all form. When the Prophet declares, 'I have seen my Lord in the most beautiful of forms'[27] it is evidently a question of a tajallî fî 'âlam al-khayâl, in the imaginal world where 'spirits take bodies and bodies become spirits'. When Ibn 'Arabi describes his own vision of Divine Ipseity and even adds in the margin a diagram showing the figure in which the Huwiyya appeared to him,[28] there too it is a question of a theophany taking place in this intermediary world (barzakhî), which he also calls 'Land of Truth' (ard al-haqîqa).[29]

But nothing would be more contrary to the Shaykh al-Akbar's thought than to believe that this imaginal world constitutes the nec plus ultra. By insisting on the importance for Ibn 'Arabi of the notion of the 'âlam al-khayâl, Corbin filled a serious gap in previous studies. By paying too much attention to this discovery, he was led to overestimate its importance and reduced the field of perceptions of the divine to the domain of formal theophanies. Many of Ibn 'Arabi's works overrule this limitation which would prohibit all access to the absolute nakedness of the Divine Essence: forms, be they tangible or imaginal, are created and cannot confine the uncreated. The highest knowledge is beyond every image; it requires what Meister Eckhart calls *entbildung*. If the perception of the tajallî suwwarî or barzakhî represents, relative to the blindness of the majority of human beings in their earthly condition, a considerable privilege, it remains very imperfect. If, under different names - most often *mushâhada* - it occupies an important place in the account of the spiritual experience of Ibn 'Arabi himself or other *awliyâ*, it is because theophany, when it is formal, can, up to a point, be described. Speaking of a famous contemporary Sufi, 'Umar Suhrawardi, Ibn 'Arabi emphasises several times that his tajallî was only barzakhî for otherwise he would not have maintained that it was possible to look at God and hear Him at the same time.[30] 'When He (God) allows Himself to be gazed upon, He does not speak to you', he wrote in another passage, 'and when He speaks to you, He does not allow Himself to be seen unless it is a question of a theophany in a form':[31] this wording obviously implies the possibility of a supraformal theophany.

Some important information about this can be found in the 'Book of Theophanies', of which Osman Yahya has compiled an excellent critical edition accompanied by a commentary by Ibn Sawdakin, which transcribes the explanations which he received from Ibn 'Arabi's own mouth, and by an anonymous commentary, the *Kashf al-Ghayât*, sometimes attributed to 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili but which is probably not his work.[32] Chapters LXX, LXXI and LXXII describe successively the theophanies of 'red light', 'white light' and 'green light' and the meetings that the Shaykh al-Akbar had at each of these stages: with 'Ali b. Abi Talib in the first, then with Abu Bakr and finally with 'Umar. Here we are at the closest to the mystery of the Essence which is symbolised by the 'radiant light (al-nûr al-sha'sha'ânî) by which one apprehends but which cannot itself be apprehended' because of its blinding brilliance.[33] The red light, the *Kashf al-Ghayât* tells us, is only a reflection of this light of the Essence in the immensity of the khayâl mutlaq, and it is still

only a question here of a ru'ya mithâliyya, of a vision in imaginal form. The white light represents a more elevated degree than the red and green for, Ibn 'Arabi tells Ibn Sawdakin, 'the colour white is the only one which includes all the others.. Its rank is that of the Name of Majesty [Allâh] amongst the other Names and that of the Essence amongst the attributes.'[34] But Abu Bakr, however, who is standing in this white light, has his face turned towards the west - the place of occultation of light for the west is 'the mine of secrets': thus it is clearly pointed out to us that it is beyond the highest formal theophanies, beyond created lights, that the uncreated light of the Divine Essence is revealed to him who turns towards the 'occidental' darkness.[35]

All vision assumes a commensurateness (munâsaba) between that which sees and that which is seen. Between the divine infinity and the limitedness of the creature, this munâsaba is evidently lacking and all possibility of 'seeing God' other than in an indirect way, in the forms in which He manifests His names, seems then to be excluded.[36] If mushâhada is like that, the contemplation accessible to mortals is not even an 'advance payment' of the beatific vision promised to the elect who will see God 'like the moon on the night of the full moon': it is only a very imperfect prefiguration of it. That is what the definition that Ibn 'Arabi gives of it seems to confirm: contemplation, he says, is indeed vision (ru'ya), but a vision which is preceded, on the part of he who sees, by a knowledge of what he is going to see. It is then strictly limited since the contemplator refuses to recognise the theophany as such if it presents itself other than in conformity to his previous conception, with his îtiqâd. Vision stricto sensu, on the contrary, presupposes the absence of this preliminary conditioning of which the contemplator is the prisoner. It receives all theophanies without subjecting them to the test of recognition, without referring them to a previous model.[37] One may note, however, that Ibn 'Arabi, despite these very rigorous technical definitions, does not feel obliged to respect the distinction thus established between mushâhada and ru'ya and, on many occasions, employs one or the other word indifferently. Nevertheless, the context allows one, as we shall see, to clear away the apparent ambiguities and contradictions.

When Ibn 'Arabi writes that 'theophany only occurs in the forms of beliefs (i'tiqâdât) or needs (hâjât)',³⁸ or again that 'the Theophany of the Essence can only take place in the form of mental images and conceptual categories (ma'qûlât),^[39] these remarks only apply to contemplation taken in its limited sense. But he also says, 'God has servants whom he has allowed to see Him in this life without waiting for the future life';^[40] now, to describe what, this time, is indeed vision, he often uses the terms shuhûd and mushâhada. This is the case in a passage of the Futûhât where, speaking of the muqarrabûn (those who are brought close), a term which for him designates the highest degree of sainthood, he states that they are in perpetual contemplation and never come out of it although 'the tastes of it are varied'.^[41]

How can such people overcome the obstacle which the total absence of proportion between God and man presents? 'The looks do not reach Him' states the Qur'an. Although he often has recourse to the traditional distinction between 'interior sight' (basîra) and 'exterior sight' (basar), Ibn 'Arabi overlooks it here; what he retains is the fact that the Qur'an uses the plural absâr and not the singular basar.^[42] The multiplicity inherent to the creature cannot in fact grasp the One. It follows that 'it is God's look which reaches God and sees Him and not yours'.^[43] 'He is the One who sees, He who is seen and that by which He is seen.'^[44]

Therein resides the paradox of vision. Only he who has lost everything, he whose contemplation is free from all form, attains to the Being in His absoluteness. Nothing remains of 'he who has lost everything' (al-muflis): in contradistinction to formal theophanies, which are compatible with the subsistence (baqâ') of the creature, this tajallî which is beyond forms implies the annihilation (fanâ') of the one to whom it is granted.[45] It prevents by that very fact all appropriation of vision - and that is the true sense of the lan tarânî the grammatical 'second person' has no place besides the divine 'I'. 'The Essential Divine Reality is too elevated to be contemplated... whilst there remains a trace of the creatural condition in the eye of the contemplator.'[46] This extinction of the contemplator in the most perfect contemplation has a logical consequence which may, however, seem strange: in this mushâhada - or to give it its real name, this ru'ya - there is neither joy, nor knowledge.[47] A logical consequence in fact since 'joy' and 'knowledge' would imply a reflexive action, a turning back on oneself which is incompatible with the sine qua non of vision of God. But would it not then be a question of a sort of coma of which one would ill understand that it constituted a privilege?

Ibn 'Arabi gives a reply to this in several of his works:[48] joy and knowledge are the fruits of mushâhada but these fruits cannot be garnered except on coming out of the contemplative state. For, corresponding to every true mushâhada (otherwise it would only be 'a drowsiness of the heart', nawmat al-qalb) there is necessarily a 'witness' (shâhid). This witness, who takes over the evidence of the vision and authenticates it (allusion to Q. 11:17, wa yatlûhu shâhidun minhu), is 'the trace left in the heart of the contemplator by the contemplation'.[49] Having regained consciousness, like Moses after the tajallî which struck him down, the individual then delights in this supreme knowledge whose price is precisely the unconditional submission to the mortal splendour of theophany. 'No one will see his Lord before he dies', the Prophet said.[50] But he also said: 'Die before you die.'[51] And that is why Ibn 'Arabi, echoing this hadîth, unhesitatingly wrote in the Kitâb al-Tajalliyât [52]: 'Demand vision and do not be afraid of being struck down!'

Are there any favoured places or times for this vision? God is free to manifest Himself when He wishes, to whom He wishes, how He wishes. But He has let His servants know the Surest of ways that lead to Him. It is only given to the creature to see God through God's eye. Now a well-known hadîth qudsi teaches us, with reference to the servant whom God loves: 'When I love him, I am his hearing by which he hears, his look by which he sees...

We are told that this servant approaches God by supererogatory acts. But, the hadîth specifies: 'He does not approach Me through something which I love more than with the acts that I have prescribed for him.' These prescribed acts, the farâ'id, are therefore above all those which may lead to vision, and the reason for this is that they already represent a form of death since the will of the servant plays no part in them: it is God alone who determines their moments and their forms.[54] But, among these obligatory acts, there is one which holds a particular importance: the ritual prayer (al-salât) which is, as the Prophet said, mi'râj al-mu'min, the 'spiritual ascension of the believer'. For Ibn 'Arabi, this ritual prayer is the favoured place for the highest theophanies. These theophanies, always new, appear hierarchically in a harmonic relation to the different positions prescribed for the believer. I have shown elsewhere[55] that some replies formulated in enigmatic terms to Tirmidhi's well-known questionnaire would be

elucidated once one understood that they refer to the *salât*. The mysterious sessions (*majâlis*) during which God speaks correspond to the *julûs*, the sitting position, which symbolises stability, vigilance and permanence (*baqâ'*): conditions which are all necessary to hear the divine discourse but which exclude vision. But those to whom God thus speaks (the *muhaddathûn*) and who, in this respect, are 'behind a veil' are also in another respect *ahl al-shuhûd*, people of contemplation.

They are so when the conditions required to hear God disappear and are replaced by their opposite: annihilation, which tears the veil and of which the symbol is *sujûd*, prostration. Do not let the word 'symbol' mislead us. For most people prostration is most certainly nothing more than a gestural representation of this annihilation which must leave all the space to the One without second. For some, this symbol is operative and for them what Ibn 'Arabi writes in the *Tanazzulât Mawsiliyya* [56] is verified: 'your rising up is in your abasement'. When their body crashes against the earth, they arrive at the summit of the 'Sinaï of their being'. And, there, the *lan tarânî* resounds in the void; there is no longer anyone to hear it.

Notes

1. For the biblical facts relating to the vision of God, see also Judges: 6, 22-3 and 13, 22. Cf. also the article by Colette Sirat, 'Un midrasch juif en habit musulman: la vision de Moïse sur le Mont Sinai', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, Vol. CLXVIII, no.1, 1965, pp. 15ff.
2. Tabari, *Jâmi al-Bayân*, ed. Shakir, XIII, pp. 90-105.
3. Qurtubi, *Al-Jami li-Ahkâm al-Qur'ân*, Cairo, 1938, VII, pp. 278-80 (on 7:143) and VII, p.54 (on 6:103).
4. Fakhr al-din Razi, *Tafsîr Teheran*, undated, XIV, pp. 227-34.
5. We are summing up very briefly here a set of attitudes that, of course, present divergencies which it is not appropriate to list here. On the doctrine of the Ash'arite *kalâm* concerning this subject see Daniel Gimaret, *La Doctrine d'Al-Ash'arî*, Paris, 1990, second part, Ch. X, p.329-45.
6. Bukhari, *tawhîd*, 24, pp.1-5.
7. Darimi, *'aqâ'id*, 303, pp.11-12.
8. On Tustari, refer to the work by Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam*, Berlin-New York, 1980, pp. 165-75. Niffari's position regarding the possibility of vision here below seems to be more positive. See his *Mawâqif*, ed. A. J. Arberry, London, 1935 (see index for *ru'yat Allâh*).
9. Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjûb*, trans. R. A. Nicholson, 6th edn, London, 1976, pp. 329-33.

10. Qushayri, *Risâla*, Cairo, 1957, p.40.
11. Qushayri, *Lata'îf al-Isharât*, ed. Ibrahim al-Basyuni, Cairo, undated, II, pp. 259-62.
12. Najm al-din Kubra, *Fawâ'ih al-Jamâl*, ed. F. Meier, Wiesbaden, 1957, paras. 42, 95, 97.
13. Ruzbehan Baqli, *Arâ'is al-Bayân*, Indian lithographed edn, 1315 H., I, pp. 271-7.
14. Ruzbehan Baqli, *Mashrab al-Arwah*, Istanbul, 1973, p.215.
15. Ibn Maja, *fitan*, p.33.
16. *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, Bulaq, 1329 H., III, p.349.
17. This hadîth does not appear in the canonic collections. For its use by Ibn 'Arabi, see for example, *Futûhât*, II, pp. 232, 327, 399; III, p.267.
18. There are many references to texts of Ibn 'Arabi's relating to the idea of *tajallî* in the work of Souad Hakim, *Al-Mu'jam al-Sûfî*, Beirut, 1981, pp. 257-67.
19. *Futûhât*, IV, p.591.
20. *Ibid.*, I, p.166.
21. *Ibid.*, I, p.498.
22. An oft-repeated statement. See, for example, *Ibid.*, IV, p.19.
23. *Ibid.*, III, pp.132-3.
24. *Ibid.*, II, p.597. Ibn 'Arabi points out that the secret of *kayfiyya* is unknown even to the prophets and the angels.
25. Cf. Henry Corbin, *L'imagination Créatrice dans le Soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi*, Paris, 1958, Part Two; Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, Tokyo, 1983, Ch. 11.
26. *Futûhât*, I, p.91.
27. On this hadîth of disputed authenticity, cf. H. Ritter, *Das Meer der Seele*, Leiden, 1956, pp. 445 ff. Cf. also Jili, *Insân Kâmil*, Cairo, 1963, Ch. 42.
28. This vision, which occurred on the night of Wednesday 4th of the month of *rabî al-thânî* in the year 627, is described in *Futûhât*, II, p. 449 (27th *fasl* of Ch. 198) but the diagram which accompanies the account has not been reproduced by the editor. It appears in the 1293 H edition, II, p.591, and is reproduced by Asin Palacios, *El Islam Cristianizado*, Madrid, 1931, p.105, by Corbin, *L'imagination*, p.175, and by A. A. Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibnu'l-'Arabî*,

Cambridge, 1939, p.114.

29. This is specifically the title of Chapter 8 of the *Futûhât* which is a description of this 'imaginal world'.

30. *Ibid.*, I, p.609; III. p.213.

31. *Ibid.*, I, p. 397. Corbin's position, which excludes all informal contemplation, is defined in particular, in *L'imagination*, Part Two, Ch. 4 ('La Forme de Dieu'). It is based on a very selective reading of Ibn 'Arabi and of Jili (see, on the latter, Ch. 41 and Ch. 62 of *Insân Kâmil* where he refers to verse 7:143).

32. *Kitâb al-Tajalliyât*, Teheran, 1988. The vocabulary of the *Kashf al-Ghayât* presents significant differences from that of Jili. The text makes no reference, besides, to other works by Jili, contrary to the latter's custom.

33. *Ibid.*, pp.420-i. The Prophet said of this light: *Nûrun annâ arâhu*, 'It is a light, how should I see it?' (Muslim, *îmân*, p.291; Tirmidhi, *tafsîr* S. 53:7). On this *hadîth* see *Futûhât*, IV, pp. 38-9.

34. *Ibid.*, p.425. Cf. also the *Kashf al-Ghayât*, p.429. Note that, in the vision mentioned in Note 28, the Divine Ipseity appears to Ibn 'Arabi as a figure of white light on a background of red light.

35. On the symbolism of the west in Ibn 'Arabi, see *Futûhât*, I, pp. 67, 68,71; II, p.121; III, p.287; *Kitâb al-Intisâr*, printed in *Rasâ'il Ibn al-'Arabi*, Hyderabad, India, 1948, 2 vols, p.4.

36. *Futûhât*, IV, p.38.

37 *Ibid.*, II, p.567.

38. *Ibid.*, II, pp.277-8 and III, p.119. The episode of the Burning Bush illustrates, for Ibn 'Arabi, the theophany 'in the form of one's needs': because Moses is seeking fire, it is in the form of fire that God manifests Himself to him (cf. *Fusûs al-Hikam*, ed. A. A. Affifi, Beirut, 1946, pp. 212-13).

39. *Futûhât*, II, p.606.

40. *Ibid.*, IV, p.38.

41. *Ibid.*, III, p. 104. This Chapter 328 forms part of the series of 114 *manâzil* ('spiritual abodes') which, as I have shown in a recent book (*Un Océan sans Rivage*, Paris, 1992, Ch. III; an English translation of this work has been published by SUNY Press in 1993), correspond to the *sûras* of the Qur'an in reverse order. Chapter 328 corresponds to sum 56 and the terms which are used there (*sâbiqûn*, *muqarrabûn*, etc.) are taken from this *sûra*.

42. *Futûhât*, IV, pp.37-8.

43. Ibid., IV, p.2.

44. Ibid., IV, p.38.

45. Ibid., III, p.105 and IV, p.191. Such is also the position of Qashani in a short unedited letter (Risâla ft Qawlihi ta'âlâ: Arinî Unzur Ilayka) MS Yahya Ef. 2415, folios 14-15.

46. Kitâb al-Fanâ' fî'l-Mushâhada (Rasâ'il), p.2. Note that this treatise is a complement to Chapter 286 of the Futûhât which corresponds, in the order of the manâzil, to sum 98 and whose theme is taken from the first two words (lan yakun) of this sum (Un Océan sans Rivage, Ch. V).

47. Kitâb al-Tarâjim (Rasâ'il), p.42. See also Futûhât, IV, p.55.

48. See Futûhât, Ch. 266; Kitâb al-Tarâjim, p.16; Kitâb Wasâ'il al-Sâ'il, ed. M. Profitlich, Fribourg, 1973, pp. 43-S; see also Badr al-Habashi's Kitâb al-Inbâh, ed. Denis Gril, in Annales Islamologiques, XV, 1979, p.106, para. 8.

49. Istilâhât al-Sûfiyya (Rasâ'il), no.60. This definition is taken up by Qashani, amongst others, in a work of the same title (Cairo, 1981, pp.153-4) and by Jurjani in his Ta'rifât, Cairo, 1357 H, p.114.

50. Cf. note 15.

51. Tirmidhi, qiyâma, 25. On this theme of 'initiatory death', see Futûhât, II, p.187; III, pp. 223, 288.

52. Chapter 100, p.517.

53. Bukhari, tawâdu. Ibn 'Arabi has included this hadîth in his Mishkât al-Anwâr and quotes it and comments on it many times. (Futûhât, I, p.406; III, p. 68; IV, pp. 20, 24,30, 65, 312, 321, etc.)

54. That is why, for Ibn 'Arabi (cf. in particular Futûhât, IV, pp. 24. 449), the closeness acquired by the accomplishment of obligator) acts (qurb al-farâ'id) is more perfect than that obtained by the accomplishment of supererogatory acts (qurb al-nawâfil). It is to the former that the case of the muqarrabûn corresponds (ibid., II, p.104) for whom 'contemplation is perpetual' and who see 'the multiplicity in the One and separation in union'. On this subject, see Un Océan sans Rivage, pp. 144ff. and my translation of the Ecrits Spirituels by Emir 'Abd al-Kader, Paris, 1982, note 84, pp. 202-4.

55. Un Océan sans Rivage, pp. 136ff.

56. Tanazzulât Mawsiliyya, Cairo, 1961 (under the title Latâ'if al-Asrâr), p.103.

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